

REVIEW OF GUNNAR SKIRBEKK'S "CRISIS AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY. SHORT POLITICAL WRITINGS"

Gunnar Skirbekk (2016). *Krise og medansvar. Politiske Småskrifter*
(*Crisis and Co-responsibility. Short Political Writings*).
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Abstract. The monograph *Krise og medansvar. Politiske Småskrifter* (*Crisis and Co-responsibility. Short Political Writings*) is one of the last monographs of the internationally recognized philosopher Gunnar Skirbekk who begins his academic career as a research assistant for Herbert Marcuse and Avrum Stroll at the University of California. Regardless that the "short political writings" form was inspired by Habermas, Skirbekk's "short writings" display much more than simply the incorporation of intellectual impulses from Habermas and other significant intellectuals. By referring to Foucault, Skirbekk defines his approach as a matter of adopting an "ideology-critical archeology", while analyzing the genealogy of different phenomena such as politics and expertise, religion and modernity, culture and identity, philosophy and eco-ethics.

Keywords: transcendental pragmatics; philosophy of the sciences (*vitskapsfilosofi*); philosophy of modernity; language politics; Norwegian philosophy; eco-ethics

Regardless that the "short political writings" form was inspired by Habermas (and his "kleine politische Schriften") (Ibid.: 8), Skirbekk's "short writings" display much more than simply the incorporation of intellectual impulses from Habermas and other significant intellectuals, although his book is rich of comparative analyses which demonstrate the author's high competence in different fields of social sciences. Skirbekk's writings provide a genealogical reconstruction, which he defines in one of his articles as an "ideology-critical archeology" referring to Foucault (Ibid.: 162). The latter concerns the way in which the symbolic power, characterizing diverse phenomena (such as politics and expertise, religion and modernity, culture and identity, philosophy and eco-ethics), could be reconstructed as an accumulative display of different types of symbolic capital which have socio-cultural, political, economic and moral implications at once.

The first part of the book, called "Politics in Science-based and Crisis-afflicted Societies", consists of three articles. In the first article, Skirbekk analyzes how freedom, understood as a matter of personal autonomy, is intrinsically connected with the nature of being a responsible citizen in a modern democracy. In this context, he makes an important methodological specification which provides a clue to understanding why commonly shared responsibility is a crucial factor for recognizing the socio-cultural tension brought into a society which is afflicted by crisis. Skirbekk conducts an insightful investigation concerning why modern democracy cannot successfully function unless it is supported by a discursive culture which is sufficiently informed by co-responsibility.

Specifically, Skirbekk's significant contribution to the debate about freedom versus paternalism concerns the way in which his suggestion goes beyond thinking in dichotomies. He elaborates upon the possibility of grounding the normative validity of the complex interaction between different social agents as a matter of commonly shared responsibility.

In turn, it is the socio-cultural and intrinsic political relatedness of modern democracy with a discursive culture, as displayed within the second article, that provides the reconsideration of the symbolic capital which Skirbekk defines as counter-expertise. Building counter-expertise is profoundly defined by him as a democratic and rational project, in so far as it encourages the diversity of rationality as being recognizable within the framework of democratic debates. Skirbekk analyzes the normative reasons of defining counter-expertise beyond the irrational speculations by making the important clarification that scientific knowledge is not only "perspectivist" and eventually, determined by interests, but also "uncertain" in many cases (Ibid.: 42). Uncertainty is recognized by Skirbekk as gaining its normative validity due to a normative gradualism which is rooted in our search for better arguments, way from weaker arguments.

By extrapolating some crucial points characterizing conservatism, as displayed in a book written by two conservative politicians, Torbjørn Røe Isaksen and Henrik Syse, Skirbekk traces conservatism's implications within a Norwegian context. In the third article, he outlines how history plays a role in distinguishing the difference between the value conservatism which has its roots in the culture of State Officials and the value conservatism which has its roots in the early people's movements. Furthermore, conducting a political genealogical analysis, Skirbekk reconstructs the reasons behind the moderate transition, in Norway, from tradition to renewal due to "a pragmatic understanding of politics" which is foreign not only to "the revolutionary Jacobinism", French style, but also to both Anglo-American and German socio-political developments (Ibid.: 61).

The second part called "Religion and Modernity" also consists of three articles which display some critical reflections upon the genealogy of different aspects

concerning the role of religion within the processes of modernization. In the first article, Skirbekk examines the reasons behind the role of multiculturalism in the Norwegian welfare model. He clarifies how by being a modern, science-based society, the Norwegian welfare State is grounded in plurality of disciplinary perspectives and institutional differentiation, including cultural diversity to which multiculturalism belongs as well. However, Skirbekk does not accept the recent development of multiculturalism, since there are both institutional and specifically theoretical boundaries of how multicultural a culturally modern society can be. In this context, he clarifies two important points, namely, how being democratic and based on scientific plurality, the Norwegian welfare state guarantees that the normative validity of multiculturalism can be justified in “a reflexive and discursive way” (Ibid.: 77).

In the second article, Skirbekk examines the origin of unintended blasphemy, as evaluated in respect to the necessity to have religious purification, which is inseparable from the different socio-historical visions of God. Specifically, Skirbekk traces the socio-historical and psychological foundations of the theological problem of evil, as related not to the issue of God’s existence, but rather as being an outcome of what we understand of and how we talk about God (Ibid.: 104).

Against the background of interpreting the reasons behind the problem of pluralism, socio-historical explanations and that of blasphemy, Skirbekk draws the important conclusion that the contemporary vision of God within modern, science-based societies is “a more distant conception of God” (Ibid.: 102) in both an epistemic and normative sense; in this respect there are limits as to what God’s words can say to us regarding the “big and small challenges in the modern risk society” (Ibid.).

In turn, in the third article, Skirbekk explores what makes the Norwegian perspective of religious and secular-ethicist communities in Norway, as determined by the Stålsett-committee and the critical responses to it, illuminative for revealing how the Norwegian church has influenced the processes of modernization. Specifically, Skirbekk examines the role of Christianity in Norwegian history by reevaluating Weber’s influence in the way in which Danish-Norwegian Protestantism played a significant role for the modernization processes by being incarnated into given actors, institutions and movements.

Within the framework of revealing the particular socio-cultural context in which religion has had an impact upon the process of national self-identification, Skirbekk critically examines the Stålsett-committee’s idea that religious and secular-ethicist politics can become leading principles in the Norwegian society (Ibid.: 112). He also emphasizes that Norwegian secular-ethicist communities (like the “humanetisk forbund”) have a juridical status and economic support which are similar to those of religious communities. On a macro-methodological

level, Skirbekk draws the conclusion that the similarities and differences regarding the aforementioned types of communities are related to two more fundamental criteria of demarcation, namely, what suits a culturally modern democracy and what does not.

The third part called "The Norwegian Story as a Modernization Project" consists of three articles. They respectively examine mutually related aspects revealing how the Norwegians have gradually constituted their sense of self-identity against the background of the varieties of citizenship, culture and language in time, as well as how the first two variety types have an impact upon the symbolic power of Norwegian language as a heterogeneous phenomenon.

As a turning point in the debates, Skirbekk outlines the role of the Parliament in 19th-century Norway as encouraging the interplay "between State Official and people's movements" (Ibid.: 124). In the end of the 19th century, the situation in Norway is described by Skirbekk as being politically homogenous, in contrast to the socio-culturally situation which is heterogeneous. The latter situation concerns the resolution in 1885 between "the Norwegian people's language" ("det norske Folkesprog") (the one which is later called New Norwegian (nynorsk)) and "our common written and literary language" ("vort almindelige Skrift- og Bogsprog") (or what is later called literary language (bokmål)) (Ibid.: 134).

The aforementioned debates mark the discussions about so-called language politics in Norden which is the main topic in the second article of this part. In terms of methodological approaches, Skirbekk chooses those from the philosophy of the sciences (vitskapsfilosofi) and the related theory of modernity. His contribution concerns the examination of the way in which autonomous persons in modern societies are supposed to master different codes which are recognized as being appropriate for their respective institutions. In this context, he profoundly describes the Norwegian language model as being related to the way in which the right to master a common language is also initially dependent upon the right to master underlying modern codes.

Analyzing the aforementioned specifications, Skirbekk finds the origin of the language debates in Norway as being grounded in the initial institutional and political tension between multicultural society and multicultural person. In addition to the pressure between the society and the person in question, he points out the role of English which also implies pressure as it bears its own cultural impulses. In this context, Skirbekk provides the suggestion of encouraging the consolidated Scandinavian community of cognate languages by contextualizing the study of language as being related to studying history, as well as that of comparative linguistics with a focus upon dialects. Concerning the complexity of the contemporary language situation in Norway, the ideology-critical archeology adopted by Skirbekk demonstrates how the "social capital"

(cf. Bourdieu) behind the linguistic alternatives also gains normative validity due to its internal paradoxes.

The concluding, fourth part of the book called “Ways of Thought and Boundaries of Nature” consists of three articles devoted to some characteristics of Norwegian philosophy, transcendental pragmatics and eco-ethics. The article about Norwegian philosophy provides not only an insightful comparative analysis of the philosophical trends in the post-war period, but also reveals how they gain a particular symbolic capital as being intrinsically connected with the political and general situation of the sciences at that time. Skirbekk explores in detail the debates between Arne Næss and Hans Skjervheim, two of the leading philosophers at that time, revealing the intellectual environment around them and thus he broadens the reader’s perspective regarding the complexity of the intellectual impulses incorporated into post-war Norwegian philosophy. Special attention in this analysis deserves Skirbekk’s description of the seminar at the University of Bergen, which had as a starting point for discussions the works of late Wittgenstein and early Heidegger – “a prolongation of ‘praxeology’ with contributions from both Kant and analytical language philosophy” (Ibid.: 183) – whose most outstanding representatives were Kjell S. Johannessen, Tore Nordenstam and Skirbekk himself.

The next period of Norwegian philosophy marks the time of “politization” in the 1960-1970s which has its roots in the resistance against Nazi’s ideology (Arild Haaland wrote his PhD thesis on Nazism), Arne Næss’ participation (together with Jens A. Christophersen and Kjell Kvalø) in UNESCO’s project on democracy, and crucial philosophical works of Knut Tranøy, who was a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps during the war.

However, by politization, the reader should not think of ideologization, but rather of a developed sensitivity and concern for urgent political challenges. That is why the politization of the late 1960s should be examined as “being both a matter of political engagement and reasonable competence in political theory” from Kant through Hegel to Marx and new Marxism (Østerud, Hellesnes, Skirbekk, Dalseth, Øfsti).

According to Skirbekk, the general attitude of Norwegians towards philosophy has gradually changed as a logical result of the development of university from being a bastion of the higher classes into a mass institution. This in turn raised another challenge, namely, the growing number of philosophers without education in the field of social sciences and vice versa. The “gap” was filled in by Knut Tranøy who introduced the subject of the “theory of science” (vitenskapsteori) to the Norwegian philosophical debates on Jeløya-conference in 1975. Skirbekk examines in detail Tranøy’s initiative which was developed at the University of Bergen, as well as why, by being a meta-theory (research of the research) (Ibid.: 195), the theory of science contributed to recognizing

philosophy as a discursive practice within which "we physically and socially 'see' those with whom we talk, and where we together seek better insights" (Ibid.: 196).

The second article displays some crucial features of transcendental pragmatics, namely, the reasons behind its importance in both philosophical and general terms. As one of the main premises for choosing such an approach, Skirbekk points out the idea that transcendental pragmatics can be interpreted as a response to radical skepticism and cynicism in both intellectual and existential terms.

He outlines four universal claims of validity, namely, those of truth, a normatively determined right, truthfulness, and meaning. Regarding the role of the truth-claim, Skirbekk pays special attention to Albrecht Wellmer's criticism towards Apel's concept of truth as a matter of reaching an ideal consensus. In this context, Skirbekk's own criticism towards Apel's theory concerns the fact that there is an "unavoidable diversity of multiple languages" which implies linguistic and conceptual diversity (Ibid.: 207). Skirbekk is also critical towards Wellmer's conception which raises doubts whether "grammatically based epistemic exchange should be interpreted as a universal validity-claim" (Ibid.).

On a macro-methodological level, Skirbekk argues that while after the Second World War, transcendental pragmatics was considered as a counter-move to positivism, existentialism and Nazism, nowadays the intellectual and political situation raises some new challenges. In this context, he builds an intellectual diagnosis of the future of transcendental pragmatics. It could function as a moderator of the modernization of a new type which is inseparable from a respective cultural diagnosis. The latter also changes and thus requires new changes in our responsibility as social, political and moral agents to be introduced.

The last, third article on ethical gradualism provides insightful critical reflections upon the mutually related reasons behind what makes contemporary life vulnerable. Skirbekk finds the origin of the complex understanding of the vulnerability of life in the parallel contextualization of two paradigms shaping the contemporary discourse of eco-philosophical reflections – specifically those of sustainable development, as defined in the Brundtland report, and Arne Næss' theory of deep ecology. Furthermore, Skirbekk argues for the necessity of introducing ethical gradualism to provide a medium position between Brundtland's anthropocentrism and Næss' deep ecology.

Skirbekk demonstrates that if the categories of humans as moral agents and of non-humans as being initially excluded from the group of moral agents are taken for granted, it would affect the normative validity of two crucial issues, namely, those of animals' asymmetrical rights in respect to humans and so-called advocacy representation (Apel "advokatorische Vertretung", Ibid.: 227 – 228).

Thus, without denying the normative validity of moral agency, as exerted on human side, since humans are the only potential moral agents and discussants, Skirbekk relevantly introduces the debate about gradualism, as concerning both humans and other beings from the following mutually complementing perspectives. Not all humans can be considered as being both reasonable and responsible moral agents by default (e.g. mentally retarded people and babies). On the other hand, there are animals (such as chimpanzees) which may demonstrate higher abilities than particular groups of humans or given individuals.

However, by justifying the normative validity of ethical gradualism, Skirbekk does not deny the crucial role of embodiment which relies upon a biological foundation without being reduced to it. An illuminative illustration of the complexity of this issue can be found in his thought-provoking analysis of the so-called demarcation problem between humans and robots and eventually, Mars' inhabitants (Ibid.: 245). Even if one assumes that robots with artificial intelligence are more intelligent and performative (in their particular sense) than humans, the lack of bio-bodily embodiment which provides an opportunity of a broad spectrum of feelings, such as joy and feeling of pain, makes these inhabitants unable to participate in meta-ethical discussions in a way which is similar to that of humans. On a macro-methodological level, Skirbekk profoundly couples the role of ethical gradualism by recognizing the normative validity of fragile life with clarifying why eco-philosophical reflections are never reflections upon nature alone.

Elaborating upon A. Schweitzer's vision of "reverence to life" and H. Jonas' "reverence to vulnerable life", Skirbekk raises the debate to a more fundamental level, namely, to one which justifies the necessity of a commonly shared co-responsibility for the purposes of preserving the universal balance as a part of a process ontology where "everything goes to everything" (Ibid.: 252).

Disenchanted the roots of the aforementioned process ontology as a political ontology can give us some significant hints in understanding why Skirbekk insists that it is hard "to know *when* and *how* it [the crisis] will happen, but not *that* it can happen" (Ibid.: 8). His monograph provides an insightful existential diagnosis of our time marked by a crisis with a complex origin. Correspondingly, the complexity of commonly shared co-responsibility turns out to be interpreted as a new and old issue at once, since Skirbekk's ideology-critical archeology makes possible the Phoenix of responsibility to regain its normative validity in a dialectical manner.

Furthermore, Skirbekk's book encourages debates about why it is of existential importance that we are "open and self-critical towards tendencies which are not sustainable or towards possible crises" (Ibid.). An attitude that requires all of us to preserve what Skirbekk calls, somewhere else, "a young

man's search for meaning"¹⁾ as an intellectual *modus vivendi* in a time of provocative pessimism.

NOTES

1. See Skirbekk's book *Nihilism? A Young Man's Search for Meaning* (originally published 1958 in Norwegian).

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